Lao Community Portrait

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Introduction

Laos is one of the most ethnically diverse Asian countries. Although its population was estimated in 1999 to be just 5.4 million,[1] it contains over sixty different ethnic groups speaking eighty-five languages and dialects.[2] Laos is a mountainous country, and these ethnic groups live in the mountains. In general, each mountainside has the same pattern of settlement by these ethnic groups—stratification based on altitude.[3] Usually, different ethnic groups will share more culturally and linguistically with their members on another mountainside at the same altitude (even if that mountain is in a different country) than they will with neighboring groups of different ethnicity who live slightly below or above them.[4]

In modern times, the Lao have split the country roughly into three ethnic groupings: the lowlanders, the uplanders, and the highlanders.

The Lao Lum, or lowlanders, include the Lao, who are the largest ethnic group in Laos comprising just over 50% of the population, and the many different Tai ethnic groups,[5] who make up another 15% of the population.[6] The Lao Lum retain complete dominance culturally, linguistically, politically, and economically over the other Laotian ethnic groups.[7] They have the best contiguous spread of farmland, mainly do wet-rice farming, practice Theravada Buddhism, and speak a Laotian version of Thai. The Lao emigrated to Laos from China starting in the eighth century[8] and began the Laotian empire of Lan Xang in the fourteenth century.[9] Their initial advantage was solidified by the French, who colonized Laos in 1890.[10] In general, the French gave educational opportunities only to the Lao ethnic group, usually to those who previously held elite positions. Such elites were granted all governmental positions, even in those areas where they were a minority.[11] Despite the French colonial presence in Laos, because the French primarily had contact only with Laotian elites, they had very little influence on the rest of society.[12] Since most of the Laotian refugees who came to America were from rural societies, the review on the Lao that follows

will focus on village life rather than on the urban, middle-class elites.

The second grouping is the Lao Theung, or uplanders, who reside at around 2,500 feet, and do swidden, or slash-and-burn, agriculture supplemented by hunting and gathering. They are animist or spiritualist, and speak Mon-Khmer languages, but generally lack a written language.[13] The Lao Theung make up another 25% of the population.[14] The largest of them (also the second-largest minority in Laos) is the Khmu, who are thought to be the original inhabitants of Laos,[15] probably from around Luang Phabang.[16] As the Lao, Thai, and Tai ethnic groups migrated to Laos, the natives were pushed onto the poorer lands of the hill country and subjugated by the newer ethnic groups.[17] The Khmu along with other midland ethnic groups were previously called *kha*, which means "slave" in Lao.[18]

The last group is the Lao Soung, or highlanders, who inhabit areas at 3,000 feet and above. They primarily do slash-and-burn agriculture supplemented by hunting and gathering, and are animists and ancestor worshipers.[19] They speak languages in the Sino-Tibetan language group.[20] The two most common highlanders are the Hmong (also called to Meo or Miao) and the lu Mien (also called the Man or Yao),[21] who together make up 10% of the Laotian population.[22] The highland ethnic groups are the most recent immigrants from China. Most have come to Laos since 1850. Some first passed through other Southeast Asian countries, which still have lu Mien and Hmong villages. Because of their isolation and semi-migratory lifestyle, they have retained their independence more than most other minorities in Laos.[23]

The recent history of Laos has been complicated by two simultaneous wars with very different goals. In 1953 the Laotian population finally succeeded in gaining independence from France.[24] This opened up Laos for the first war between the Royal Lao government, which represented the old, French-supported elite, and the Pathet Lao, a communist group that started before independence in 1949. The Pathet Lao hoped to create a new society that would change some of the age-old inequities among the stratified Laotian social classes and between the Lao and other ethnic groups in Laos.[25] At the same time that this internal war was occurring, the United States started participating in the Laotian government and helped finance the Royal Lao Army in its battles against the Pathet Lao.[26] The fight against the Pathet Lao became one more piece in the United States war against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Starting in 1964, the United States fight against the Pathet Lao began to have a striking impact on the rural population, particularly that located in Pathet Lao—dominated areas because the United States began major cluster bombing of

Laotian villages.[27]

Although the United States presence in Vietnam was the main focus in the American press, in fact the "secret war" in Laos made the Laotian countryside, where nearly 90% of the population lived, almost uninhabitable.[28] Three million tons of bombs were dropped, more tonnage per capita than on any other nation in the history of warfare.[29] Nonetheless, at the same time the Pathet Lao succeeded in taking over more territory.[30] Villagers were faced with three choices: align themselves with the Pathet Lao, try to remain neutral, or join the Royal Lao and the United States military efforts. Those who did join the Royal Lao Army felt betrayed when, after many promises, the Americans left them to their fate just as the Pathet Lao succeeded in conquering Laos in December 1975.[31] Approximately 500,000 Laotians, most of whom were Lao Lum and Lao Soung villagers, left Laos either because their economic base had been destroyed due to mass bombing, or because of previous affiliations with the Royal Lao Army.[32] Refugees crossed the Mekong River into Thailand and settled into Thai refugee camps waiting for years to be settled in a third country. About 350,000 Laotians ended up coming to the United States.[33]

The Lao

Reflective of the strong influence of Indian culture, Laos had a highly stratified society.[34] The Laotian language mirrored this stratification by having four different tones dependent on to whom was speaking: one for royalty, one for superiors, one for equals, and one for inferiors.[35] Since the royal family was endowed with semidivine roots, it was hard to argue with the king's proclamations.[36] Although the Lao royalty and through them provincial officials had total control over villages, except for taxes, and occasional military impressment and corvée labor, most villages were left alone to govern themselves. Most villagers tended to stay in the immediate world of their own and neighboring villages within which most families were relatively equal.[37]

The Lao village, usually composed of thirty to fifty houses containing 150 to 300 people,[38] functioned as a self-sufficient, independent entity, which provided its members with everything they needed for physical, moral, and mental well-being and identity.[39] Village members helped each other throughout their lives. Although each family had its own fields, villagers would do labor exchanges during planting and harvest time. Each family would contribute equally in time, money, and labor to bigger village projects such as building roads or a school.[40] Villagers would help each other during house raisings, and also during times of illness, death, and other emergencies.[41] In addition,

every true village had a Buddhist temple, or wat. The upkeep of the monastery and the bonzes (monks) fell exclusively on the village and also helped bring members together as a single group.[42]

Formation of and Roles within the Family

The formation of relationships between families also contributed strongly to villages becoming a single community. Laotians did not have last names until 1943, when the government required them.[43] For this reason, most people knew their relatives only three generations back. Families did not form greater clan groupings based on shared family names.[44] As 80% of marriages took place within the village, most of the village was related by blood or by marriage.[45] Because children counted both their mother's and their father's families equally as relatives,[46] they had a large number of people to call on for help. In this way, the village became like a greater family. Most households in the village consisted of parents, children, and perhaps one child's spouse and children[47] Occasionally relatives or close friends who became "uncles or aunts" also lived with the family. Relationships between children and parents were strong. Because of their religious belief in reincarnation (described later), these relationships were further enhanced as they were thought to represent the accumulation of many lifetimes of interactions.[48]

Men's and women's roles within the family were clearly defined and, although different, were usually considered equal.[49] The father of the family was considered the head of the household and represented the family at all village meetings.[50] The mother often had control of the house, managed household finances, and sold family produce at the market.[51] Couples usually discussed all problems and made major decisions together.[52] Women were also allowed to inherit property, could be shamans, and participated along with other elders as advisers to the headman and families to help them solve conflicts.[53] Although there was a sexual division between men's and women's work—men tended to do the heavier work in the fields and women to do more work at home—many tasks were done together and were interchangeable.[54] For example, when counting families' contributions to a labor exchange, everybody over sixteen, male or female, was counted as equal.[55]

Youth were allowed a large degree of sexual freedom and generally decided on their own mates. However, if pregnancy resulted, marriage almost always occurred.[56] Such liberty was allowed because it was often believed that the pair had been lovers in a former life and were continuing their relationship in this one.[57] The engagement process and marriage ceremony were

complicated and worked out between both sets of parents.[58] As usual, the ceremony involved much laughter and horseplay as well as ritual. For example, the new groom had to figure out a way to pay off his new sisters-in-law in order to convince them to wash his feet before he was allowed to climb the ladder into his in-laws' house and meet his new bride.[59]

When young couples got married, they tended to live with the wife's family for the first couple of years so that her first child could be born in a comfortable environment and so that the husband formed a close relationship with the wife's family. This period also usually served as the young husband's "bride price." By working for his father-in-law for several years, he paid back some of the labor his wife's family would lose after the marriage.[60] If the young husband was found to be unacceptable, the marriage was terminated at this point.

After the couple moved out, much of the time they settled near the wife's family. Usually the youngest daughter would continue living permanently in her parents' house after marriage. The young couple would take care of the wife's parents as they aged and would often inherit the house after their death.[61] Because of these living patterns, women had a uniquely powerful role in Laotian village life.

Once a man succeeded in getting married, he was allowed to marry a second time. However, both second marriages and divorce rarely occurred. Only wealthy men had the means to pay a second bride price.[62] Instead, it was common to have girlfriends in addition to one's original spouse.[63] Few women had boyfriends, and the repercussions for being found with one were severe.[64] Divorce was allowed, but was extremely difficult for a woman to initiate because the person responsible for breaking up a marriage had to pay a large fine. Few women had sources of outside income available to them. However, almost all marriages survived and prospered because men's and women's roles were clearly defined and respected. In addition, marriages were actively supported by both sets of parents and, when needed, by the council of elders.[65] All parents and elders were ready to mediate conflicts and encourage decisions based on the long-term needs of the family, rather than on the immediate interests of the individual.

Getting an Education

By living in the close confines of the village community, most children automatically assimilated appropriate behavior and skills. Children, who were mainly cared for by their grandparents,[66] learned from listening to their stories and by actively observing and then slowly

participating in the tasks of adults.[67] Children were usually not forced to help their families or to learn any particular skill at home, at school, or in the temple.[68] Further, they were usually not praised once they had successfully mastered a new ability. This was because it was believed that the successful completion of a task should be its own reward.[69] In addition, because the capacity to do something was thought to be an innate quality, it was not useful to encourage or to praise. At the same time, the closeness of the community created an environment where children wanted to join their peers in helping to contribute to their families. When children did something wrong, they were rarely physically punished.[70] Usually, they did not feel as if they had individually sinned or were morally bad. Instead, they knew they had brought shame to their family in front of the community. This was usually enough to keep them in line.[71] Although a large degree of deviation was allowed in personal values and beliefs,[72] in general, children wanted to grow up to be respected. Respect was gained through concealing displeasing emotions and being generous, cooperative, nonargumentative, and moderate, and through merit-making activities related to Buddhism such as becoming a bonze.[73]

By becoming a bonze, many boys received an education in addition to that picked up around the village. In the temple they would learn discipline, moral values, a Buddhist ceremonies and scripture, meditating, reading, writing, basic arithmetic, and many manual skills.[74] Bonzes tried to teach boys to follow the eightfold path: (1-2) right views (or knowledge) and right intention, which were based on wisdom; (3-6) right speech, action, living, and effort, which were based on morality; and (7-8) right attention and concentration, which were based on learning techniques to concentrate the mind.[75] Secular schools focused on teaching children knowledge. Knowledge was thought to be a pool of pragmatic information often used to develop a plan of action that will be carried out in the near future (step one on the path). In contrast, the temple tried to teach wisdom. Wisdom was thought to be a deeply intuitive sense of judgment based on a perfect and comprehensive understanding of what has always been right in the past.[76] In addition to wisdom, the temple taught morality and meditation, thought to be the basis for the other steps on the eightfold path. For this reason, when there was a secular school available, its curriculum often seemed limited or even somewhat useless to villagers.[77]

Education in the school or the temple usually embodied discipline and flexibility, two characteristics typical of Laotian village life.[78] Both school and temple curricula were learned by rote. Teachers and bonzes were greatly respected, and discipline was strong. At the same time, it was the individual's choice based on his innate ability whether he would apply himself, and whether

he would continue his studies.[79] These same characteristics were also true for those who became a bonze before they got married or when they were elders. The temple was a strict hierarchy mirroring the secular political system.[80] In addition to the temple boys and novices, there were six different levels of bonzes.[81] Despite this, although bonzes had to listen to and obey their superiors, rules were not rigidly defined and they could leave the monastery at any time.[82]

The Lao Version of Buddhism

The Buddhism that was practiced in Laos was a unique intermingling of traditional Buddhist beliefs and spirit worship. Theravada Buddhism, originally from India, is thought to have been introduced in Laos by Khmer (Cambodian) monks in the fourteenth century.[83] At that time Laos already had a strong religious base worshiping the *phi*, or natural spirits inhabiting the land, the household, the village, and many other places and people.[84] Buddhist values and beliefs were added to traditional practices rather than replacing them. The phi continued to be included in all ceremonies, often by the Buddhist bonzes themselves.[85] Once a year a celebration was held to particularly honor the village's protective spirits.[86] In addition, most households had altars to the phi who lived in and safeguarded the household.[87] Most livestock were sacrificed to the phi before being eaten.[88]

At the same time, with some alteration, traditional Buddhist ideas continued to be practiced. Such doctrine included a belief in a lifetime of suffering, reincarnation, doing merit-making activity in this life in order to determine the quality of the next life, and the ultimate goal of enlightenment.[89] Many other Buddhist cultures believed suffering in this life encouraged behaviors leading to a better next life. Many purposely avoided sensuality as a means of gaining enlightenment more quickly.[90] The Lao, on the other hand, always believed in mixing merit-making opportunities and the pleasures of the moment.[91] It was felt that since gaining pleasure obviously shows the individual's success in eradicating suffering, which was also the reason for becoming enlightened, it was a logical thing to do.[92] Therefore, almost all Buddhist ceremonies and formal occasions, such as funerals, included feasting, drinking, singing, storytelling, and active courting by the youth. For the same reason, there was no point in working incredibly hard in order to accumulate wealth for its own sake. In fact, hoarding a surplus caused a loss of prestige in the community. Money was useful only in that it could help one gain merit and confer pleasure through greater giving.[93]

The Basis of Traditional Healing

Buddhism and worship of the phi were also intermingled when dealing with sickness. Humans were believed to be composed of thirty-two souls, each of whom was present within a different organ in the body.[94] In fact, the Lao word for human, *khon* also means "to mix" not only because humans have been created out of multiple souls but also because they live within many worlds and over many lives.[95] When one soul left, that portion of the body became ill.[96] Souls could be called back by both bonzes and by shamans using ceremonies and herbs in order to rebalance an individual's original "mixture" so that they will be healthy.[97] Curing a person almost never involved cutting or operating since it was counterproductive to open up the body and encourage an additional soul to escape.[98] Mental illness was not recognized as a disease in Laos. People were considered to be either normal or insane.[99] Those who were disturbed, upset, or angry were also thought to be out of balance. Balance was regained whether by rituals to call back the missing soul, or by going to the temple to talk with the bonze and to meditate.[100] At death, all thirty-two souls would disperse and then recombine with other spirits in order to be reincarnated again.[101] In addition to bonzes and shamans, some of the few available secular teachers carried Western medical kits that they dispensed with varying degrees of skill.[102] However, few Laotians in the countryside had any experience with Western medicine.

Leadership in the Village

Although gender helped to establish one's role in the family, age usually was the main determinant of status both in the family and in the village.[103] Younger children were always supposed to respect their elder siblings.[104] All children were expected to respect and obey parents and, to an even greater extent, grandparents. In addition for formally serving on the council of advisers, grandparents advised their children and helped them solve internal family conflicts. In general, elders received almost all leadership positions in the village.

Most villages had a wide variety of leadership who served in many different functions. Although the chief bonze was the most important leader in the village,[105] he generally did not involve himself in secular affairs unless they directly affected the temple.[106] Bonzes also became leaders in that they officiated at all ceremonies and major celebrations of the life cycle, provided boys with education, and acted as advisers for problems that could not be solved in other ways.[107] When they left the monastery, Buddhist laymen became respected elders in the community and continued

advisory relationships formed with youth when they had been young disciples in the temple.[108] In addition to the council of elders, the shaman, and occasionally a secular teacher, the main authority in the village was the village headman and one or two assistants, all of whom were voted in by the villagers.[109] The headman was always the most respected male head of the household.[110] He was usually somewhat wealthier than other villagers, which enabled him to contribute generously to celebrations. However, it was his moral stature, fairness, and generosity that caused people to choose him as leader.[111] Although the leader was greatly respected, he was usually thought to be equal to his peers.[112] This meant he had to create consensus through persuasion, rather than through authority.[113] The headman, who was unpaid, had a specifically defined set of jobs including organizing a series of labor exchanges between families and for bigger village projects, settling disputes, welcoming strangers, announcing government directives, and referring problems.[114] Headmen were generally elected for life.[115]

Leaving Laos

With the rise of the Pathet Lao and the massive American cluster bombings, patterns of life in the village started to change dramatically. Thousands of people were killed or maimed. Fields were filled with unexploded ordnance that often blew up when people tried to work in the fields.[116] Most people tried to work mainly at night. Eventually over 700,000 of the 1 million people located in Pathet Lao-occupied territories left their villages.[117] Many of them crossed the Mekong River into Thai or UN-run refugee camps. The trip to the camp was extremely dangerous. Many Thai soldiers used the opportunity to randomly imprison, steal, or rape the refugees.[118] Once in the camps, refugees discovered limited food, water, or medicine; extremely poor housing with almost no privacy; violence and rape by fellow refugees and by Thai administrators; and an overwhelming helplessness and dependence on UN provisions that was difficult for such independent villagers to accept.[119] Most refugees spent years in the camps waiting and hoping to be accepted into the United States and unable to continue their lives.

Endnotes

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